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C O N F I D E N T I A L THE HAGUE 000210

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/31/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [NL](#) [AF](#)
SUBJECT: NETHERLANDS/ISAF: TURNING THE CORNER

REF: GRUBB/SCHOFER EMAILS TO WASHINGTON ...

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Classified By: Charge D'Affaires Chat Blakeman,
reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Following over 12 hours of Parliamentary hearings on January 30, the two largest parties in the Dutch Parliament -- the coalition CDA and opposition PvdA -- appear poised to vote in favor of participating in ISAF III. This would all but ensure a broad majority in favor of deployment when Parliament takes up the issue again on February 2. Senior MFA officials and parliamentary contacts credited the mostly positive hearings, especially a confidential brief by SACEUR, with shifting the tide in favor of deployment. Public statements of support from UN SYG Kofi Annan, Australian Foreign Minister Downer, EU Special Representative Vendrell, and SACEUR added to the positive momentum. End summary.

Long Day of Testimony

¶2. (C) On January 30, spokespersons from the Second Chamber's foreign affairs committee heard from a number of officials and experts linked to Afghanistan, including Afghan Foreign

Minister Abdullah and Defense Minister Wardak, Chairman of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission Sima Samar, Kabul University Chancellor Ashraf Ghani, Afghan parliamentarians from Uruzgan, EU representative to Afghanistan Francesc Vendrell, French commander of special forces and former ISAF commander Gen. Py, Former military advisor to the UN SYG Gen. van Kappen, as well as journalists and experts from NGOs, institutes, and universities.

13. (C) An overwhelming majority of the testimony presented supported Dutch involvement in Stage III; many sought to encourage the Dutch while assuaging some of their major concerns (see refs for more complete read-out). FM Abdullah said the Dutch could continue to monitor prisoners transferred to the Afghan National Authority. Former Afghan Minister of Finance Ghani said this is not a case of charity, but of Dutch national interests and suggested the Netherlands could help with water management issues in Uruzgan. EU Representative for Afghanistan Vendrell said the Dutch should be proud to be among the usual suspects called upon to do vital work in Afghanistan; a negative Dutch decision would affect the EU's reputation and reduce its influence in the world.

14. (C) Several NGOs and institutes cautioned the Dutch to temper their expectations for success. Johannes Oosterkamp of the Alternative Income Project Helmand said Dutch troops should expect bomb attacks and ambushes. Gen. van Kappen argued that the Dutch could accomplish very little in two years time, but suggested that someone must lay the groundwork for Afghan reconstruction, and the Dutch can and should take the mission. Only journalist Arnold Karskens -- who wrote an account of his visit to Uruzgan for the Dutch tabloid Nieuwe Revu -- suggested that the mission was impossible.

Other Important Visitors

15. (C) Several other international heavyweights visited The Hague and spoke on the margins of the parliamentary hearings. SACEUR briefed select parliamentarians on the distinction between ISAF and OEF. Discussion included a lively exchange on mission viability, flexibility regarding the two year mission length, and Plan B prospects following a Dutch negative decision. Gen. Jones later spoke to the press, dismissing Stage III comparisons to Srebrenica and noting that ISAF would have far more troops in southern Afghanistan than currently in OEF. UN SYG Kofi Annan told the press that the mission would not be as successful as hoped without the Dutch deployment. Australian Foreign Minister Downer expressed confidence in the Dutch military, and hoped that Australia would work with the Netherlands in Afghanistan should the Dutch parliament approve the mission.

Labor More Supportive

16. (C) Following the weekly parliamentary faction meeting on January 31, Labor Party (PvdA) leader Wouter Bos told the press that the Cabinet was heading in the right direction on Stage III. He noted that Dutch military intelligence brief to parliamentarians and the January 30 hearings had made the decision much easier. He added that many Labor Party members were in favor of the mission, a couple still cannot say yes, and a few still have doubts, but the Labor Party will vote as one voice. Bos stressed that we are not there yet; Labor will make a final decision February 2. PvdA foreign policy spokesman Bert Koenders separately told the press that the January 30 hearings and statements by senior international figures had had a positive impact on the party's views of the mission, noting that when the EU, UN, and NATO all support (a mission), then you have to take it seriously.

CDA: Done Deal

17. (C) In a conversation with PolCouns January 31, CDA foreign policy spokesman Henk Jan Ormel predicted that CDA would vote overwhelmingly in favor of the deployment. The hearings, he stressed, had helped CDA leadership overcome divisions within the party; now, he said, only one CDA member (out of 44) remained adamantly opposed to the mission, where only a few days ago the number was between 10 and 15. Ormel also predicted that the PvdA would support the mission, and credited SACEUR's testimony with giving the PvdA's leadership what they needed to make a positive decision. He added that while coalition member D-66 remains opposed to the mission, that is no longer a government problem but a problem for D-66, as it would be suicide for the party to leave the coalition under current circumstances.

MFA Officials Believe Corner Turned

18. (C) Deputy POLDIR Pieter de Gooijer and MFA Security Department Head Rob de Groot separately told Emboffs January 31 they believed a corner had been turned in the ISAF III debate. With VVD firmly on board and CDA already leaning in favor of deployment, the apparent shift of PvdA all but guarantees a broad majority in favor of the deployment on February 2. De Gooijer and de Groot both praised SACEUR for providing the final piece needed to bring PvdA on board, and expressed thanks to the Mission for providing critical assistance while maintaining a low profile. De Groot noted that only D-66, which remains firmly opposed to the mission, still tries to portray the mission in terms of supporting U.S. policy; all other actors are debating the mission on its merits, which is an argument the government believes it can and will win.

COMMENT:

19. (C) The debate is not over, but for the first time Dutch government officials and parliamentarians are openly predicting a broad parliamentary majority in favor of deployment on February 2. The apparent PvdA shift is a major turning point, and the GONL deserves credit for bringing the maximum international pressure to bear through a coordinated strategy of a positive media campaign and the January 30 hearings. All parties agree SACEUR's briefing to Parliamentarians, and timing the debate to coincide with the London Conference, were key to neutralizing the most serious arguments against the mission. Parties opposed to the mission may still force a roll call vote -- but even then, a majority of PvdA members equates to a broad majority in favor of the mission. The next forty-eight hours will be critical, and we plan to meet with parties still on the fence, including List Pin Fortuyn. But -- for once -- the trend is definitely in the right direction.

BLAKEMAN